NEWS-HERALD (CLEVELAND, OH) - JUNE 14, 1992 - BETH ROBBINS via COUD-I

UFO abductions

Invitation-only conference being held at MIT to discuss phenomenon

By David L. Chandler
Boston Globe

BOSTON — There are hundreds of these people, and the stories they tell are strikingly similar, and similarly incredible: They were abducted by aliens, taken aboard a spaceship, poked, examined, sometimes scarred and eventually returned home.

For the most part, they don't speak publicly about these memories because of snickers they invariably elicit. But this weekend, in what may be the largest gathering ever of UFO abductees and the scientists and authors who study them, they will meet at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology to discuss this phenomenon.

Sponsored by an MIT physicist and a Harvard psychiatrist, the closed, invitation-only conference is neither sanctioned nor endorsed by MIT, and all participants have signed a pledge swearing not to divulge what is said within its four days of sessions.

The meeting is intended to allow abductees and researchers to compare notes on experiences, how best to conduct such research, and how to help people troubled by memories they say they have of being abused by aliens. Because many of the 150 expected participants fear for their jobs if word of their involvement gets out, conference chairman David Pritchard, an MIT physicist, is trying to keep the whole thing under wraps.

While there has been talk that some MIT faculty members are unhappy about the conference, MIT news office director Kenneth Campbell said Friday he was not aware of any controversy. Until 2½ years ago, Harvard psychiatrist John Mack, cochairman of the closed meeting, said he was skeptical of the whole idea of UFO abductions. "I gave it no credence at all," he said.

But after interviewing more than 60 people who say they have been kidnapped and experimented upon by aliens, he said "the information I've gotten from them is just staggering." They tell "very consistent and powerful stories," he said.

While the claims of consistency among the stories told by abductees convince some people, others give it little credence. MIT physics professor Philip Morrison, a leading advocate of a scientific search for extraterrestrial life, said humans live in the same cultural milieu and added he finds the reports of independently gathered accounts bearing striking similarities "a very faint argument indeed. ... I would find it very far from being evidence that there's something out there."

Most abduction stories are similar to the one told by Pat, a pseudonym. Pat said she was lying on her bed several years ago when she became aware of a blue beam of light in her room. She went outside and saw police cruisers at a nearby lot. That's when she found herself transported upward into a UFO, where she was examined on a table, her eye was cut with a knife, and she observed alien beings and children who appeared to be half-alien, half-human.

Clearly shaken by her recollections of the experience, which she remembered years later through hypnosis, she said during a recent appearance on the talk show "Nighttalk with Jane Whitney" that "I wish I could be a disbeliever."

"This is not like seeing Elvis at the K mart," Pat said defensively on the Whitney show. But, she said, her accounts and those of other abductees are typically greeted with snickers, making them feel they have been victimized twice.

It was the anguish of people such as Pat that caught Mack's interest. While not claiming to be able to say what actually happened to these people, Mack said in an interview that he is convinced they are victims of a real trauma who need help and understanding.

Others think, however, it is the very people doing the "investigations" who are inducing the traumas, and that it's a dangerous business. James Oberg, a Houston-based aerospace engineer, author and UFO debunker said in an interview that he has heard of "complaints from people who need further counselling after they feel their memories have been screwed-up by these people."

Mack, founder of the department of psychiatry at Cambridge Hospital, said he was a skeptic himself until he met Budd Hopkins, author of "Intruders," a book that set off the current furor of interest in the subject. As he listened to Hopkins' accounts of people from all over the country who told similar stories, he said, his opinion changed.

What seems to have struck Mack, Hopkins and others who are convinced there is something to the accounts is the similarity of details in stories told by people from different parts of the country and different walks of life who have had no prior contact.

But what kind of trauma? Many scientists and mental health professionals are willing to believe these people have indeed experienced something traumatic. But some think there may be more mundane explanations — dimly remembered childhood sexual abuse, for example.

Like such cases, the abductees typically remember their experiences only years later, with great difficulty.